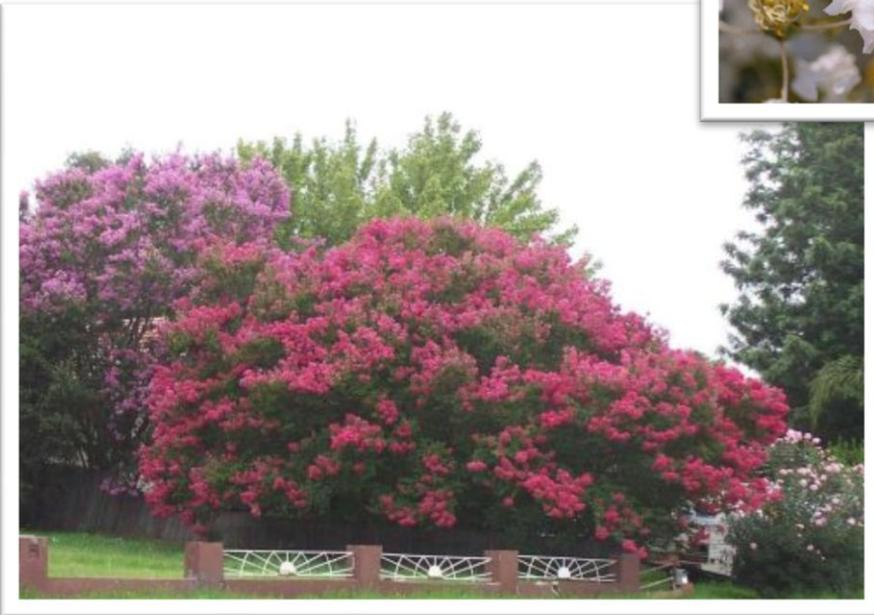
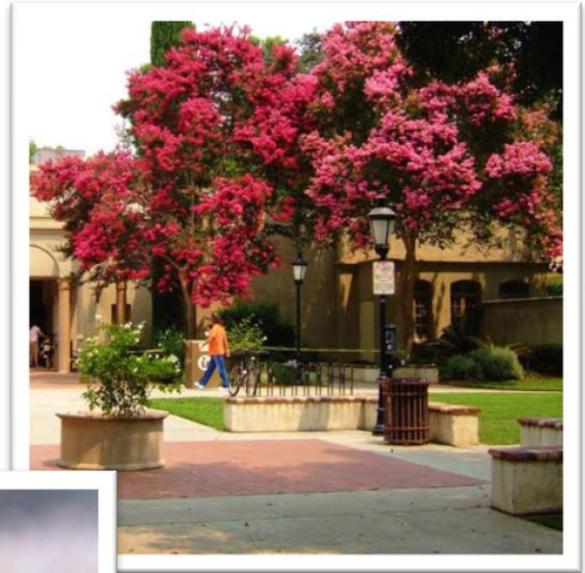




Proper Pruning of Crape Myrtles

A Guide brought to you by the
Wake Forest Urban Forestry Advisory Board



With special thanks to J. C. Raulston Arboretum; Virginia Cooperative Extension; Clemson Cooperative Extension; City of Charlotte; NC Urban Forest Council; Dan Gill, LSU Ag Center; Janet Carson, Fine Gardening; and Greg Grant, Aggie Horticulture.

Believe it or not - Crape myrtles should be pruned like any other tree – rarely and only to correct problems and enhance their natural shape. Prune your Crape myrtles in late January to early March if necessary.

Never top Crape myrtles – yes, we know professional landscape crews are willing to do this, and it's no wonder homeowners are confused. There is a size of Crape myrtle for almost every situation, so choose the one that's right for your site rather than trying to make a tree behave like a shrub. Topping or harsh pruning does produce a lush growth at the cut sites. New growth appears vigorous, but it is actually structurally weak and more susceptible to fungus diseases such as powdery mildew. Blooms are larger and fewer in number. Unsightly large, swollen knobs form at the point where pruning is done each year, and the tree is prevented from maturing, so you don't get that wonderful exfoliating bark so prized.

Most pruning on a Crape myrtle should be done early on when the branch is the size of a pencil. Always prune back to the next branch or limb – stubs are not ideal on branches and on the trunk they are improper and extremely damaging to the tree.

With multi-trunked Crape myrtles, strive for an attractive frame with three to five main trunks and decide early which ones to prune out. You can take out interior trunks to aerate the center of the tree, but make sure you take the limb down to the ground.



Figure 1



Figure 2

As your Crape myrtle grows, it will be necessary to remove low branches to raise the canopy. Do this by pruning out the side branches on the main trunks – do this up to a height of about four to six feet, but not up to a height of more than half of the total tree height.

Remove redundant, interior, inward growing and crossing or rubbing branches. You also may need to redirect the direction of a branch's growth. This can be done by studying the branch carefully and looking for a side branch that grows in the desired direction. Prune back to that branch, and you have redirected the growth of the branch – preferably outward, away from the center of the tree. This can also be very helpful when the tree was planted too close to a structure.

Pruning Key	
■	Extra trunks and suckers
■	Redundant, interior, and crossing branches
■	Low branches
■	Pencil-thin growth

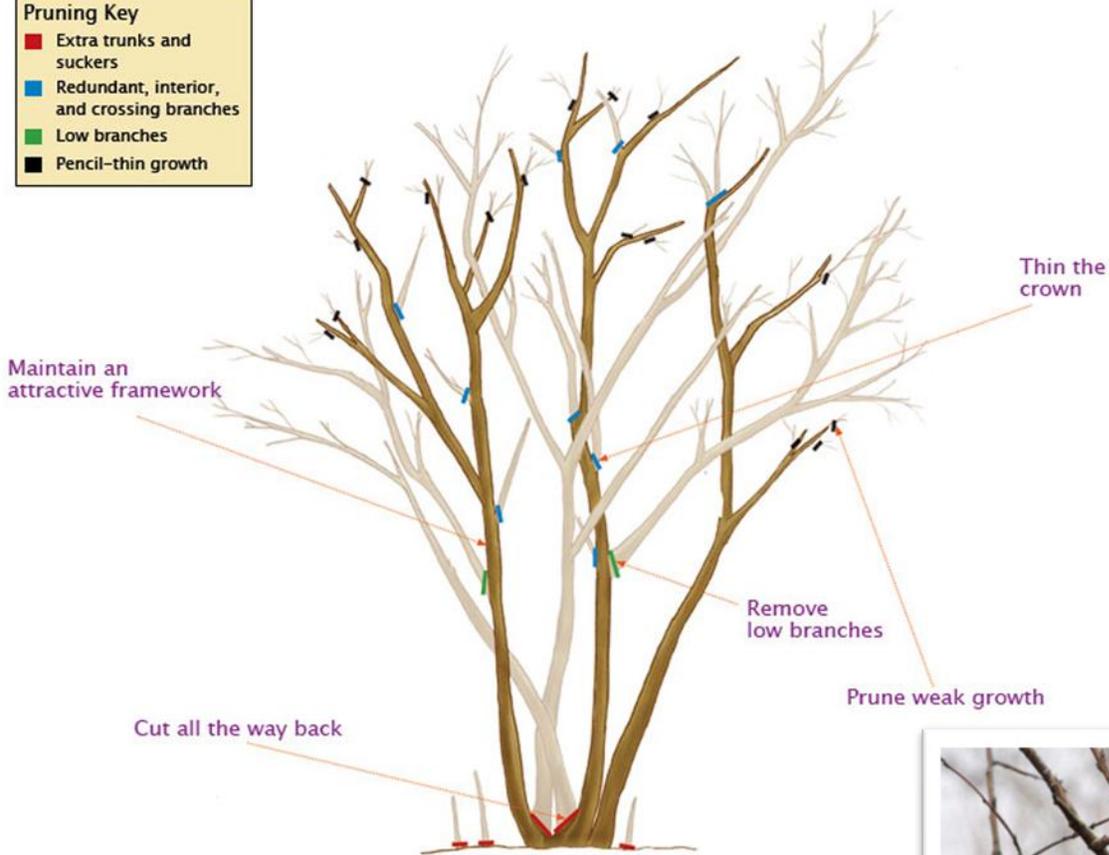


Figure 3: Cuts should go back to the next branch or limb and should be made when the branch is as small as a pencil. You do not need to cut back seed heads – new blooms will push them off and you’re not likely to be able to reach high enough to do this without being tempted to cut back too much.



Figure 4: Prune to remove branches growing into the center of the tree and crossing or rubbing branches, retaining more desirable branches. This branch should have been removed much sooner, but it is appropriate to remove it now by cutting it back to the next limb. Make your cut so that the branch collar remains.



Figure 5: For heavy branches, it is best to make the cut in three steps. The first two cuts are release cuts that keep the trunk from peeling. The final cut is placed to remove the branch stub, but leave the branch collar.



Figure 6: Before – This Crape myrtle needs to be opened up to allow air into the center of the tree, remove crossing branches and lift the canopy slightly.



Figure 7: After – This Crape myrtle has been opened up with proper pruning.

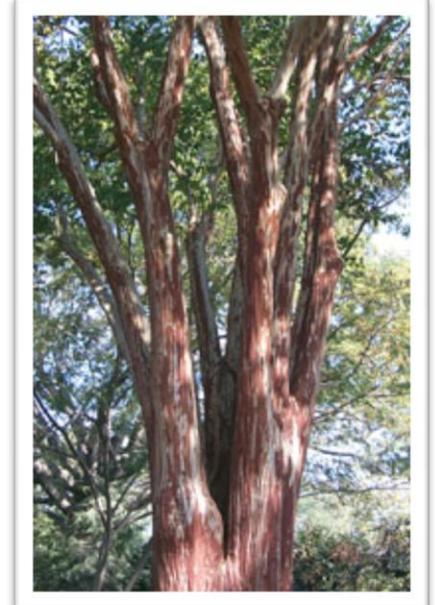
You can see one of the largest and oldest specimens of Japanese Crape myrtle growing outside Japan. During the 1950s, John Creech (U.S. National Arboretum) collected seeds on the island of Yakushima in Japan. One seedling variant resulted in 'Fantasy', which J. C. Raulston named for its unusual upright, vase-like form.



Figure 8: Japanese Crape Myrtle
Lagerstroemia fauriei 'Fantasy'
Champion Crape Myrtle

Pictures used with permission
from the J.C. Raulston Arboretum

Figure 9: Note the maturity of the
trunk with exfoliating bark
revealing the cinnamon bark
beneath.



Improper Pruning of Crape Myrtles

If you have a Crape myrtle that was improperly pruned, please contact the Urban Forestry Board for information on corrective pruning to restore the natural form to the greatest extent possible. Chances are good for cuts up to about two inches. Unfortunately, not all Crape myrtles can be saved and sometimes, it's best to start over.

Your Crape myrtle should not look like an amputee in the winter. Instead, it should show off its exfoliating bark and natural form like the beautiful specimen found at the J. C. Raulston Arboretum.



Figure 11: Improper pruning resulted in the trunk rot and tree death depicted in these two images.



Severe pruning, topping, or stumping can kill even the hardy Crape myrtle. More often, it destroys the natural form leaving a tree forced to act like a shrub with dense foliage on weak canes extending straight up from the cuts like straw from an old broom. This dense foliage creates conditions favorable for the formation of powdery mildew and reduces bloom period and number.



Figure 10: First Year – extreme topping. With cuts exceeding 2" in diameter at a height below 4' – this is an example where it's probably best to start over.



Figure 12: Subsequent Years – extreme topping results in a tree with none of the qualities admired in the Crape myrtle. It won't form exfoliating bark and bloom production is severely restricted.

For more information, you may consult the following list of resources:

- The Tree Topping Story: Pictures speak louder than words -
<http://www.ncufc.org/TheTreeToppingStory-picsspeaklouder.pdf>
- Stop the Crape Murder! –
<http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/plantanswers/publications/stopthecrape.html>
- Pruning Crape Myrtles:
 - <http://pubs.ext.vt.edu/430/430-451/430-451.html>
 - <http://www.finegardening.com/how-to/articles/pruning-lagerstroemia-crape-myrtle.aspx>
 - http://www.lsuagcenter.com/news_archive/2009/march/get_it_growing/Prune+crape+myrtles+carefully.htm
- Crape Myrtle Varieties – find the right size crape myrtle for your landscape
 - <http://www.clemson.edu/extension/hgic/plants/landscape/trees/hgic1023.html>